

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Case File No.: AA-81641

EA No.: AK-040-00-008

Type of Action: Special Recreation Permits (commercial heli-skiing tours)

Location: Chilkat Glacier icefield and its tributary glaciers to include:

Ferebee Glacier
West Creek Glacier

The following legal descriptions apply:

T. 24S, R. 57, 58E.
T. 25S, R. 58E
T. 25S, R. 57E, Secs. 25-36
T. 26S, R. 57E, Secs. 1-2, 11-12, 13-36
T. 27S, R. 57E, Secs. 1-3, 10-16, 21-25
All land descriptions are within the Copper River Meridian

Applicant(s): Alaska Heliskiing
Out of Bounds Adventures
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Preparing Office: Bureau of Land Management
Anchorage Field Office
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Date: March 2, 2000

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:

Out of Bounds Adventures wishes to offer helicopter assisted, commercially guided alpine skiing trips (heliskiing) on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered lands. They currently offer the same services under permit with the U.S. Forest Service on the Tongass National Forest. This company is the only company currently offering these services in Southeast Alaska. This proposed service will meet anticipated public demand for quality guided heliskiing in the Skagway area.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

No land use plan exists for this area. However, this environmental analysis assesses the impacts of the Proposed Action and provides a basis for a decision on the proposal (43 CFR 1610.8 (b)(1)).

C. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans:

The applicant must obtain a State of Alaska Business license and the appropriate licenses and certificates from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

The BLM does not have jurisdiction to regulate aircraft flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by aircraft overflights or flightseeing operations. BLM may regulate landing locations and on-the-ground commercial activities. Enroute operations may be indirectly influenced by requiring certain standards to be met as a condition of receiving a permit.

Permit holders are required to abide by all federal, state, county (borough), or municipal laws, ordinances, or regulations which are applicable to the areas or the operations covered in the permit. Failure to do so could result in either suspension or revocation of the permit.

The airport in Skagway is un-towered and is under jurisdiction of the FAA. FAA is the agency responsible for all aircraft travel in uncontrolled airspace. The Flight Standards Division of the FAA is responsible for all flight operations (including safety) in controlled and uncontrolled airspace.

The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for the FAA and the Department of Transportation Volume 14, Chapter 1, part 135.203 states:

“Except when necessary for take-off and landing, no person may operate under visual flight rules (VFR) a Helicopter below 300 feet above the surface or less than 300 feet horizontally from any obstacle”

Refer to EA-AK-040-95-015, Environmental Assessment for Helicopter Landing Tours in the Skagway and Haines Area, Pages 1-10 through 1-12 (available at the BLM Anchorage Field Office), for further information on other required laws and permits pertaining to jurisdiction and regulation of helicopter flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by helicopters.

A BLM Special Recreation Permit (SRP) regulates commercial services on BLM public land and related water pursuant to 43 CFR 8372 and Handbook H-8372-1. As the land is selected by the State of Alaska, a concurrence in accordance with Section 906(k) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) is required.

The Coastal Zone Management Act requires the BLM, when consulting or authorizing activities or undertaking development directly affecting the coastal zone, to insure that the activities or development be consistent with the approved Alaska Coastal Management Program to the maximum extent practical. The activities under the Proposed Action are consistent with the Alaska Coastal Management Program.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action:

Out of Bounds Adventures is based out of Juneau, Alaska. They propose to conduct heliskiing operations on public land with Helicopters (American Eurocopter, A-Star 350B-2). All flights would originate and terminate in Skagway, Alaska.

The operation season is from March 15 to May 15, 2000. They estimate 400 user days during this time period. Helicopter group size and on-the-ground client to guide ratio is 5-1. It is anticipated there will be as many as four groups of five skiers, plus their guides, each day. With two helicopters in operation, there will be two groups of skiers with each helicopter. There is the possibility of a third helicopter, but this helicopter would operate on State managed lands only.

Typically, clients and guides will be dropped off at a selected site for skiing. At the end of the ski run, they will be picked up by helicopter and returned to the top of the run or another site if desired. This scenario is repeated five to six times per group per day. With the total number of helicopter landings being two per run, approximate number of landings per day, per group is 10 to 12, or a total of 40 to 48 landings per day for all four groups. The average time spent on BLM lands for the entire operation is projected at 2-4 hours per day. Operation hours will be between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m.

Heliskiing operations would be conducted from the Temsco Helicopters heliport located in Skagway, Alaska. Clients will have a daily briefing in their lobby prior to any day of skiing. Pre-flight information will be read, explained and demonstrated to all clients prior to departure. Clients also receive extensive training on the use of avalanche rescue, including avalanche beacon and transceiver use. All guides are trained as Level I heliguides and certified by the Southeast Alaska Avalanche Center.

For the season, use areas include all areas within the following land descriptions:

T. 24 S., R. 57, 58 E.
T. 25 S., R. 58 E.
T. 25 S., R. 57 E., Secs. 25-36
T. 26 S., R. 57 E., Secs. 1-2, 11-12, 13-36
T. 27 S., R. 57 E., Secs. 1-3, 10-16, 21-25

Operation areas would include only the north facing slopes of high alpine areas in order to avoid mountain goat habitat and populations.

Flight routes to landing sites from Skagway are well established and adhere to local traffic patterns (see attached maps). Helicopters will also follow the established flight routes to high alpine sites analyzed in EA-AK-040-95-015. Upon departing Skagway, altitude gains are primarily over Taiya Inlet and mild terrain. Altitude gains to landing site elevations are made prior to flying up drainages or canyons. All landing sites for Out of Bounds Adventures are between 3,000 and 5,500 feet on primarily north facing slopes.

An EA on Helicopter Glacier Landing Tours (EA-AK-040-95-015) was completed on May 10, 1995 which analyzes impacts of helicopter use in the same area. The mitigation measures adopted in the Decision Record are incorporated in the Proposed Action (Attachment 1).

B. No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would be to continue present management and not authorize commercial helicopter operations and tours on BLM-administered lands.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

All of the land described in the Proposed Action has been selected by the State of Alaska as part of its entitlement at statehood. BLM is responsible for management of the land until it is conveyed to the State or the selection is relinquished.

The use area locations listed above are all well above treeline which occurs at approximately 2,500 feet. Landing areas are those north facing slopes within the Chilkat, Ferebee and West Creek drainages determined to be accessible for safe client drop-off and pick-up, free of any danger from crevasse's or avalanches. Most heliski areas will be in high alpine snow fields or glaciers. Some of these large open areas have rugged bare rock outcrop islands which may serve as potential habitat for local goat populations. See EA-AK-040-95-015 (p.3-16, E.e and p. 3-17 E.e and p. 3-18 E.e) for descriptions of specific glaciers and their affected environment.

A. Critical Elements:

It has been determined that the following Critical Elements of the human environment are either not present or would not be affected by the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative:

Air Quality

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs)

Cultural/Paleontological Resources

Environmental Justice (E)

Farm Lands (prime or unique)

Floodplains

Invasive, non-native plant species

Native American Religious Concerns

Subsistence

T&E Species

Wastes (Hazardous/Solid)

Water Quality (Surface/Ground)

Wetlands/Riparian

Wild and Scenic Rivers

Wilderness

1. ANILCA Section 810 (a), Evaluation and Finding:

These lands are selected by the State of Alaska and therefore do not fall under the definition of Federal Public Lands under ANILCA 102 (3) or under the authority of the Federal Subsistence Board or Subsistence Management Regulations for the harvest of Fish and Wildlife on Federal Public Lands in Alaska. Should these lands be relinquished this would fall under the authorities of ANILCA Section 810 (a).

B. Wildlife:

For specific discussion on the affected environment for wildlife see EA-AK-040-95-015, (p.3-16, E.e and p. 3-17 E.e and p. 3-18 E.e). This discusses the wildlife habitat within the potential heliski areas.

C. Recreational Areas:

During the scoping meetings for EA-AK-040-95-015, specific areas were identified by the public where the impact of aircraft noise could adversely affect recreationists. The Proposed Action does not include any of these areas. There are no known hiking trails to the snow fields and glaciers listed for the Proposed Action.

D. Socio-Economics:

The town of Skagway, Alaska has a seasonal but strong tourism based economy. Retail shops, restaurants, hotels, transportation and tours generate substantial income for the business community and sales tax revenues for the city. Active tourism businesses support other sectors of the community through spin-off purchases.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

1. Wildlife

Wildlife will experience two types of aircraft encounters. The first is enroute flight activity where helicopters are passing by wildlife and their habitats. The second are the areas for landing, taking off, and skiing activities. These are the areas of greatest concern due to the duration of helicopter hovering, shut-down and start-up procedures and associated activities.

Enroute flight routes could pass by mountain goats, brown bear, black bear, wolves, moose, and raptors engaged in a wide variety of activities depending on time of year, time of day and location. The short term exposure to noise and visual stimuli from helicopters enroute is minimized with an adequate distance from wildlife. The species most likely to be impacted by the Proposed Action would be mountain goats. Wildlife response will vary depending on distance to escape cover, terrain and duration of exposure. Mountain goats on late winter range (March and April), kidding habitat areas (May to June 15), and on isolated habitats such as land islands surrounded by snow and ice fields, may be stressed. It is anticipated that helicopters passing 1,500 feet or more from mountain goats will cause little to no visible reaction such as a flight (running) response. Multi-agency personnel are in the process of determining

adequate distances as little is currently known of the physiological or behavioral impacts on mountain goats from aircraft.

Most species of wildlife become accustomed to aircraft stimuli (including helicopters) if the perceived threat is minimized by distance, short duration of exposure, repeated patterns of flight, with avoidance of critical life cycle periods and habitats. Tolerance limits of short and long term responses of wildlife species in the proposed area are not well known.

The take-off and landing areas at high altitudes require use of maximum power during take-off and thus a higher level of noise. Landing areas are at the extreme limits of goat habitat. Some bare rock outcrops in ice fields may have small numbers of goats on them. Goats access islands of habitat by crossing extensive ice fields and may occupy some year long. They would be most affected during aircraft take-off procedures due to the sustained engine noise. Responses could range from no visible response to temporary displacement from the rock island habitat to permanent abandonment. The goats response would likely vary depending on distance of the rock island habitat from take-off and landing sites. Repeated high numbers of take-offs near the rock islands could result in temporary or permanent displacement of animals.

There is additional discussion on the noise impacts to wildlife within EA-AK-040-95-015, pages 3-11 through 13.

2. Recreation:

Noise impacts to people participating in a variety of recreational activities in the use areas may increase. These areas are also accessed by back country enthusiasts for recreation via chartered helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft or extended treks. The number of people in the area disturbed by helicopters or other aircraft is anticipated to be low, since most people access these areas by helicopter or other aircraft and are not sensitive to an occasional aircraft flying by or landing.

Recreationists could be impacted through the interruption of their solitude and quiet by the noise from helicopter overflights while involved in hunting, hiking, camping or other high alpine activities. Enroute flights would pose the least amount of noise and visual impacts. Aircraft from the communities of Skagway and Haines flying over this area are common (except for the Mt. Foster area). These flights involve commuter and flight seeing trips. The flights by Out of Bounds would increase the number of helicopters potentially passing by. Because of the low number

of flights and short use season the impact from overflights would be negligible.

More direct impacts may result from the take-off and landing activity. Hovering, engine start-up and shut-down time results in increased duration of noise. Impacts would be low because of the short duration and low number of people, in most cases zero, near the landing and take-off areas. Some recreationists may also sense some visual disturbance to the presence of helicopters in high alpine areas.

3. Socio-Economic Impacts:

The Proposed Action for Out of Bounds Adventures expands their operation potential and thus plays an increased role in the community tax base.

B. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative may reduce the potential positive socio-economic impacts in the form of a lower community tax base for the municipality of Skagway, Alaska. There is also a potential loss of recreation opportunities for people desiring access to areas they feel are otherwise inaccessible to them by conventional means.

C. Cumulative Impacts:

In 1995, EA-AK-040-95-015 analyzed the affect of glacier landings on several glaciers in the Skagway/Haines area. A large number of authorized landings have gone unused due to the applicants withdrawal. The majority of the unclaimed landing areas are west of Haines, outside the Proposed Action area for Out of Bounds Adventures. None of the previously examined and authorized landing areas south and west of Haines are being used at this time. Temsco Helicopters currently is authorized a total of 4,700 landings on BLM land and 3,980 on US Forest Service lands.

D. Mitigation Measures:

If goats are observed on rock islands, landing areas must be located a minimum of one mile from the observed goat activity. Flight paths should be altered to avoid flying over rock islands with observed goat activity.

The implementation of the Proposed Action would increase glacier landings in the affected environment from 4,700 to a maximum of 5,660 landings. This increase will have little overall impact because noise impact to wildlife from enroute aircraft is low. Cumulative noise impacts at landing areas are expected to be minimal if aircraft landing areas are located away from rock island habitats.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. List of Preparers:

Jake Schlapfer, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Donna Redding, Cultural Resources
Jeff Denton, Subsistence/Wildlife
Dave Kelley, Natural Resource Specialist

B. Consultation:

State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources
Land Status, Letter of Concurrence

U.S. Forest Service, Juneau Ranger District,
Wildlife Consultation
Past and current NEPA documentation concerning glacier landing tours

Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife Consultation

City of Skagway
Socio-Economics
Tourism

Lynn Canal Conservation, Inc
Environmental Issues
Wildlife
Recreation issues